

grasslands, and other wildlife habitat and protect farmland and ranchland are critical to meeting some of the Nation's most significant environmental challenges.

In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, escalating home energy prices, and stagnant wage growth, taking money from important federal programs in order to pave the way for billions of dollars in tax cuts shows how out of touch the majority and administration are with hardworking Americans.

The bill before us is lamentable, and I only hope that those who support it today will reassess their positions in the weeks ahead as we consider other reconciliation bills that will further add to our deficit and continue a path towards misguided priorities.

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, my Amendment No. 2415 would inject a dose of accountability and responsibility into America's efforts to rebuild the gulf coast and Iraq.

It will bar from all reconstruction efforts, both at home and in Iraq, all firms found—over the last 5 years—to have overcharged or improperly billed the government by more than \$10 million on one or more occasions.

It will also bar from all reconstruction efforts—both at home and in Iraq—all firms that have overcharged or defrauded the Government of more than \$10 million over the last 5 years.

It will also bar from all reconstruction efforts—both at home and in Iraq—all firms that have been suspended or debarred from competing for federal contracts.

It includes a national security waiver for those instances where dealing with such firms may serve the national interest.

These are serious penalties, but in both Iraq and on the gulf coast we face serious challenges, and we should not do anything less than our very best to face those challenges.

We cannot move forward on the gulf coast without looking at the administration's weak oversight of funds in Iraq. The amendment I offer today seeks to do that by assuring the American people that the Government will spend gulf coast reconstruction funds wisely.

The bill we are debating is ultimately about saving taxpayer dollars. Why not start by weeding out companies that have overcharged the taxpayer in the past?

We enjoy the privilege of living in a vastly diverse country of vastly talented citizens. In the country with the world's biggest economy, we don't need to rely on just a few privileged firms to do America's work.

We don't need over-billers, underperformers, or those who have defrauded the American taxpayer to do America's work. We need to entrust America's work, and American taxpayer dollars, to firms that embrace hard work, accountability, and a sense of responsibility about the public trust into which

they enter when they serve as a Government contractor.

America has countless firms that fit that bill. They come from across the gulf coast region and from across the country. This amendment simply helps assure that they will have a clear opportunity to shoulder the burden of rebuilding, by clearing away those firms that have abused the public trust.

Last Friday, the President announced that he would ask this Congress to reallocate \$17.1 billion in hurricane emergency funding, taking it away from the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Disaster Relief Fund, and dedicating it to rebuilding and repairing of the gulf coast. The President wants the authority to replace critical infrastructure, facilities, and equipment damaged during this year's hurricanes. These are important projects addressing important needs, and I fully support them. We must move forward, but we have to do it right.

These are big projects, including the rebuilding of key stretches of Interstate 10, a main artery connecting Texas cities such as San Antonio to New Orleans and New Orleans to points east. The proposed projects include two Veterans Administration hospitals, major military bases, and other highways and bridges damaged by the storms.

This work will help shape the gulf coast region for a generation or more. We cannot afford to get it wrong.

Sadly, this administration has gotten it wrong before. On Sunday, the Special Inspector General for Iraqi Reconstruction, Stuart Bowen, released his latest report on reconstruction in Iraq. Bowen's report makes for sobering reading.

It tells a cautionary tale as we look forward to rebuilding our gulf coast communities. It paints a grim picture of conditions in Iraq and it tells a story of administration hubris, lack of foresight, poor planning, poor execution, and the squandering of millions and perhaps billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars.

The Special Inspector General has warned us all that America's ambitious reconstruction effort in Iraq, an effort managed by this administration, is, "likely to fall far short of its goals."

We cannot let the same fate befall our communities here at home. We need to ensure—here at home—the accountability that the administration's efforts in Iraq have sorely lacked. In both situations, the situation demands that we act with speed. In neither case, though, should we ignore our oversight responsibilities.

Special Inspector General Bowen's work assessing the administration's Iraq reconstruction efforts reveals the challenges we now face at home.

Since November 2003, Congress has appropriated \$21 billion for Iraq reconstruction and relief. The President came to us that fall, seeking support for his ambitious plans to build Iraq

anew, and in a bipartisan fashion, we gave him everything he asked for.

Billions of dollars later, Iraq is still struggling to rebuild.

As Michael O'Hanlon and Nina Kamp of the Brookings Institution described Iraq last month in the *New York Times*:

On balance, the indicators are troubling. Electricity production remains stuck at pre-war levels even as demand soars, and the power is off in Baghdad more often than it is on. Unemployment is stubbornly high. Infant mortality rates are still among the Middle East's highest. And Iraq is the most violent country in the region, not only in terms of war casualties but of criminal murders as well.

How did we come to this pass?

Secretary Rumsfeld and his tight circle of Defense Department advisors—awash in unreality—failed to plan for occupation and reconstruction. Their plans for rebuilding postwar Iraq were, according to the Inspector General, "insufficient in both scope and implementation."

The Coalition Provisional Authority managed Iraqi oil revenues placed in the Development Fund for Iraq. The Special Inspector General has found that it did so erratically and irresponsibly, often with no accountability, and no records.

The Special Inspector General found that in the town of Hillah, for example, the CPA left 7 million dollars worth of projects uncompleted. What's more, the money allocated for these projects is missing.

Indeed, the Special Inspector General has found that the CPA burned through nearly \$100 million in Development Fund for Iraq money without keeping adequate records, and in too many instances, the money just vanished.

That is simply inexcusable, and there may be no way now to trace and recover those funds. But where we can track fraud and overbilling to specific companies, why should we keep giving more money to the offenders? If they won't protect the public trust, why should we trust them with new money?

Where is the accountability? Do we want any of the firms involved in the most egregious of these abuses handed new sums of money to rebuild New Orleans and the gulf coast?

Many of our Republican colleagues are demanding that we provide offsets for every penny we dedicate to Katrina reconstruction. In too many instances, they seek to place the burden for rebuilding the gulf coast squarely on the poor. Yet they failed to demand offsets, or even simple accountability, when the administration came to Congress looking for reconstruction funds for Iraq.

By adopting this amendment, we would promote honesty, transparency, and accountability in hurricane reconstruction and we would bar the door to contractors that have abused the public trust. We need to learn from the gross failings we have seen in Iraq, learn and do better.